South Side of the Sky

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In which Bachou learns just how far Chou'un is willing to go in order to complete a mission. Set between episodes eight and nine of Shin Koihime Musou: Otome Tairan.

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Introduction
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AUTHOR'S NOTE ONE: *Koihime Musou* and its sequels are the property of BaseSon, Marvelous Entertainment, and probably a whole mess of other people. If they belonged to me, Chou'un and Bachou would not have been relegated to the C-plot in *Otome Tairan* while Ryuubi and the Loli Brigade got four entire episodes.

AUTHOR'S NOTE TWO: Scorecards! Scorecards! Can't tell your cast members without a scorecard! Bachou Mouki is known to her friends by her mana (true name) of Sui. Chou'un Shiryuu is similarly known as Sei, and Kan'u Unchou is known as Aisha. There's a reason why they once devoted an entire episode to the importance of naming conventions.

AUTHOR'S NOTE THREE: This story takes place between episodes eight and nine of *Shin Koihime Musou: Otome Tairan* . It is not exactly a whimsical comedy, given the subject matter.

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" *Move forward" was my friend's only cry*

In deeper, to somewhere we could lie

And rest for the day, with cold in the way

Were we ever colder on that day, a million miles away

It seemed from all of eternity

-Yes

Never in her life had Bachou been so cold.

Their mission to track down the Persistence Herb had taken them to the very summit of Mount Tai, and while they had been successful in finding the rare plant, their descent had been interrupted by a blizzard unlike anything either of the warriors had ever experienced. In the end, they were forced to take shelter in a tiny cave while the frigid, snowy winds swirled outside.

Three days had passed, and the storm showed no signs of abating. They were running out of things to burn, and the last of the food was gone. All they had left were their weapons, their all but empty travel packs, and the blankets under which they huddled, trying to stave off the numbing cold.

Bachou stared into their campfire, wondering how much longer it could possibly last. Would it be starvation or exposure that ultimately claimed her? Neither choice appealed, certainly, but if the snow did not end soon, that would be the decision before them.

Moving her stiff neck with some effort, she looked to her left to see Chou'un, who like Bachou was huddled in her travel blanket, but who unlike Bachou seemed to be asleep. She wanted to be irritated about this, but couldn't muster the energy. Chou'un had been her normal self all along: smugly sarcastic, self-assured, seemingly treating their impending death as another opportunity to make her traveling companion uncomfortable with her innuendos and all-knowing attitude.

Didn't she realize that, short of a miracle, they were going to die in this cave?

Bachou stared down into the fire, which was shrinking as quickly as her hope. "The blizzard's held us here for three days," she muttered. "We're out of food, and we'll…"

"Do not be afraid!" Chou'un suddenly shouted from beside her, but when Bachou turned to look at the other woman, fear quickly took

the place of her initial surprise. Chou'un was staring wide-eyed across the small space between them, but those eyes were like glass, and were gazing unseeing at a spot somewhere over Bachou's shoulder.

"Sei, what's wrong?" Bachou asked, trying to draw her companion's attention.

Chou'un then thrust both hands toward Bachou, holding them cupped as though carrying something. "Here you go," she smiled vaguely, her voice nothing short of delirious. "Menma egg soup. Enjoy!"

"Sei, snap out of it! You're dreaming!"

"I see," Chou'un sighed dramatically. "So you like it. Remember how menma saved your life, and be ever thankful…"

Bachou shrugged off her blanket and reached to grab Chou'un by the shoulders and shake her, at first gently, then less so as her efforts went unnoticed by the babbling woman. "Hey! Wake up! There's no such thing as menma egg soup! You're dreaming! *Hey!* "

Her voice trailing off as though coming to the end of a breath, Chou'un smiled once more into space. "Now… I can rest in peace," she said, and with those ominous words, collapsed bonelessly in Bachou's arms.

"Sei!" Bachou cried, shaking Chou'un harder than ever. "Don't fall asleep! Fall asleep and you'll die!"

There was not so much as a twitch in reply. As carefully as her panic would allow, Bachou lowered Chou'un to the floor atop her rumpled blanket, then put her ear to the other woman's chest. To her relief, Chou'un's heart was still beating, but it sounded weak and distant. She quickly wrapped Chou'un up in the blanket, then brought over her own to cover her as well.

More awake than she had been in days, Bachou paced the small space of the cave, trying to think of something while at the same time getting some feeling back into her legs. Was Chou'un sick? Maybe there were some medicinal herbs left… not that Bachou knew much about those, of course, but she was feeling desperate enough to try anything.

After a moment of hesitation, she opened Chou'un's traveling pack. "I know you don't like anyone touching your things, Sei, but you're in no condition to get angry with me this time, okay?"

The first thing she pulled out was that ridiculous butterfly mask that Chou'un wore from time to time. Bachou had no idea why she still insisted on playing the part of this Kachou Kamen character, especially since anyone with half a brain knew that it was her under the mask.

There was something different about it, though: a closer look revealed a small loop of parchment tied around one end of it. Dismissing this as irrelevant, Bachou set the mask aside, then resumed digging in the pack.

To her shock, her hand closed over a small paper packet, and when she pulled it out, she immediately recognized it as a portion of their travel rations. Eyes wide, Bachou turned the pack over and shook it, and out fell more such packages: dried meat, fruit, vegetables and rice.

For a split second, she felt a stab of dismay and betrayal: was Chou'un hoarding food from her? That thought quickly passed, however, as she looked over the remaining travel rations. They looked… *familiar* somehow. The day they had taken shelter in this cave, they had taken stock of their remaining food and split it evenly between them. Chou'un had said at the time that what they had left would last the two of them no more than three days, and she had been right about that: Bachou had nothing left at all.

Then what was this?

One of the packets, like the mask, had a small loop of parchment tied to it. With numb fingers, Bachou quickly unwrapped and unfolded it, finding a short note scrawled on its surface.

Sui-

Finish the mission.

-Sei

At last, realization struck, and for a moment she felt numbed by more than the cold. Chou'un had indeed been right that their food would only be enough to feed two women for three days.

But it would be enough to feed one woman for six.

"Chou'un, you *idiot!* " Bachou screamed at her companion as a hot mixture of anger, shock and guilt flooded her. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing here?" There was no reply, and only the faint trace of steam from Chou'un's lips showed that she was even breathing.

Remembering the other bit of paper, Bachou grabbed the butterfly mask and untied a second note. This one read simply: *For Sui.*

"Oh, no you don't," Bachou growled, finding it easier to hold onto her anger than face any of the other, more uncomfortable emotions roiling beneath the surface. As always, Chou'un wanted to be the one in control of the situation, even when facing her own death. But why, Bachou wondered, would proud, stoic Chou'un be so willing to face her own demise?

Finish the mission. Was it for the sake of bringing back the Persistence Herb to save Kashin-shogun? That seemed unlikely: none of them had any particular love for the former leader of the Emperor's armies.

"For Kan'u, then," Bachou nodded to herself. Kan'u had entrusted Chou'un with this mission, and Chou'un would rather die than fail

Kan'u. So she had quietly given Bachou the space closest to the fire, wordlessly starved herself, and bequeathed her most prized possession…

Bachou shook her head furiously. "No. Forget it. I don't want this as a memento, so you can just drop that ridiculous idea and live, do you hear me?"

Once again, there was no reply, and Bachou sighed noisily, running her hands back through her hair as she tried to think of something. Even if Chou'un seemed committed to the idea of quietly dying so that Bachou could have a chance to live, that didn't mean that it had to happen that way, right?

"Come on, Sei, eat something," Bachou insisted, unwrapping some dried cherries and trying to force them into the unconscious woman's mouth. It became quickly apparent, though, that this would not work: Chou'un was too far gone to even chew and swallow, and trying to force this food on her would only speed along the inevitable by choking her. None of the remainder of their rations would work any better. "If only we had some of that menma egg soup you were talking about, whatever it is."

An idea flickered in the chilled depths of her mind. They didn't have soup, true, but she could come up with something, surely. Leaving Chou'un bundled in the blankets for now, Bachou rifled through her own pack until she found her teakettle. She made a short dash to the cave entrance to fill it with a handful of snow, then set the kettle and its frozen contents on the edge of the fire.

"I can't vouch for the flavor, Sei," she said aloud, filling the relative silence as best she could, "but these are desperate times." She tore into one of the packets of dried pork, then began shredding it up as finely as her cramping fingers could manage before dropping it into the quickly melting mass of snow. For a few minutes, then, she split her attention between checking her companion for signs of life and checking the teapot for signs of boiling.

After a long, tense while, the liquid in the kettle was starting to look something like broth: the weakest broth imaginable, given the state of the meat being used in its preparation, but it would be better than starvation. It had to be. Bachou poured a measure into a small cup, skimmed out the larger flecks of meat, then brought it to Chou'un. "Here, drink this," she bade her companion, snaking one arm around the other woman's back and lifting her into a sitting position.

Unfortunately, it was not going to be as easy at that. Any attempt to get Chou'un to drink resulted only in reflexive choking and sputtering. "Damn it, Sei, drink!" Bachou shouted, feeling hysteria beginning to set in. "I can't lose you! You're not meant to die in a freezing cave! Don't you *dare* make me tell Kan'u that you're not coming back! Now, *drink!* "

Her insistence was in vain, and after another failed attempt, Bachou lowered Chou'un once more to the cave floor. Tears sprang to her eyes, all but freezing as quickly as they were formed. How would she be able to face Kan'u and the others and tell them that she hadn't been able to save her?

At that moment, her eyes fell on the discarded butterfly mask. *For Sui*, the note had said. Something to remember her by? A reminder of her failure? Or was Chou'un expecting her to carry on the role of Kachou Kamen in her place?

With that, a wild idea struck. Bachou set down the broth, picked up the mask, and after a taking a deep, steadying breath, she put it on.

This probably wasn't what Chou'un had in mind when she wrote the note, but too bad.

" *Chou'un Shiryuu!"* she shouted in a dramatic voice. " *Wake up, Chou'un Shiryuu! Kachou Kamen would have words with you!"*

And then, amazingly, Chou'un's eyes popped open. It took her a moment to focus, but then a tiny smile lit up her face. "Ka- Kachou Kamen-sama?"

Once more, Bachou pulled Chou'un to a seated position and brought the cup of cooling broth to her lips. "Drink this," she ordered. "It is not yet your time! There is more for you to do in this world!"

"I… I understand, Kachou Kamen-sama," Chou'un whispered. She then sipped weakly at the broth. "Menma egg soup," she smiled vaguely.

"Indeed," Bachou nodded, playing along as best she could. "Let menma now save *your* life, so that you may return to your companions alive and whole."

Chou'un gradually drank the cup dry, after which Bachou poured another, and then a third. Before she could finish this one, though, Chou'un began to falter again. "Thank you, Kachou Kamen-sama," she whispered. "I'll… try to live, as you wish it." And with that, unconsciousness took her once more. Bachou gently lowered the other woman to the cave floor again, then let out a long sigh. That would have to do for now, then.

Now there was just the matter of keeping them alive until the storm abated. The fire would probably not last much longer, so warmth was going to become an issue. Guiltily, Bachou remembered that Chou'un had offered to share blankets during their first snowbound day, but it had been difficult not to interpret that as being propositioned. (Chou'un's sly smile as she had said it certainly had not helped.) Now was not the time to worry about her companion's tendencies, however.

"Sorry you have to miss this part, Sei," she chuckled in spite of herself as she wrapped the blankets around the both of them and held Chou'un tightly against her, front to back. She placed a hand to Chou'un's chest to check her pulse, and found it somewhat steadier than before.

"Mmm, Aisha," Chou'un mumbled, weakly reaching to clasp Bachou's hand against her chest. "Yours at last."

Bachou blinked a few times. Yours? Chou'un flirted with Kan'u all the time, and her loyalty was never in question, but… *yours?*

Regardless of the potential implications, Bachou doubted that she was going to get her hand back anytime soon. Sighing heavily, she wrapped herself more tightly around Chou'un and prayed that the storm would break soon.

Almost as though it were fated that way, the blizzard finally began to let up on the sixth day. The snow was still coming in flurries and the wind was still whipping, but less than before. And anyway, with their food now gone, it was now or never.

By tying her blanket between their polearms, Bachou had fashioned a rough sled upon which she could drag Chou'un, who was still unconscious and bundled securely in the remaining blanket, behind her. It was going to be a bumpy ride, but with her own strength waning, Bachou doubted that she could carry her companion any other way.

Once everything was ready, Bachou stepped outside briefly to check the weather one last time. The chill winds immediately numbed her to the core: she would need to keep moving if she had any hope of making the descent before her muscles seized up. Worse, though, each individual snowflake against her face felt like a needle. It was going to be hard enough to see as it was: even a little bit of protection for her face would be a help.

Bachou narrowed her eyes in thought, then smiled ruefully. Why not, really?

A few minutes later, she emerged from the cave wearing the butterfly mask and towing Chou'un behind her. And damned if it didn't help keep the snow off after all.

"Hang in there, Sei!" she shouted over the wind. "Kachou Kamen will get us out of this!"

"Sui..?"

Bachou opened her exhausted eyes and turned to face the voice that had croaked out her name. To her relief, she saw Chou'un's eyes staring blearily into her own. "You're awake," she sighed, feeling the welcome warmth of relief wash over her.

"Not that I'm complaining," Chou'un said slowly, "but we appear to be in bed together."

"We're at an inn," Bachou explained. "You've been out for about a week, all told."

Chou'un licked her dry lips. "Mount Tai?"

"A memory, thank goodness. We got what we came for, and it's over. Do you remember anything?"

"I remember…" Chou'un began, then a puzzled look crossed her face. "Kachou Kamen… saved us?"

"Yes, she shows up in the strangest places, doesn't she?" Bachou shrugged.

A slow, knowing smile spread across Chou'un's face. "She certainly does."

"Are you hungry?"

"Famished."

"I'll get you some soup. And then, once you get your strength back? I'm going to beat you senseless for that trick you pulled."

Within two days, Chou'un was back on her feet and insisting that she was fit to travel, even though it was obvious enough that her strength was largely bravado. Deciding it would be best not to argue the

point, though, Bachou went along with it, and treated their more frequent rest breaks and slower pace as though they were the normal course of events. Chou'un was nothing if not proud, after all, and now was not the time to insist that she take it easy, even in light of her recent brush with mortality. Now was simply the time to be happy that they had both made it out of that cave alive.

At last, after a week's travel, they came within sight of Touka Village, which had been their home and base of operations for the past several months. "Finally," Bachou sighed, letting out the last of her tension in a heaving sigh. "Home at last! Our mission was successful, we're returning with the rare herb for Kashin-shogun, you found that rare menma recipe you were looking for… life is good!"

She turned to smile at her companion, but to her surprise, Chou'un was not there. All of her apprehensions returning in a rush of panic, Bachou whirled around, then sighed again as she saw Chou'un standing a few paces behind, giving her a curious look. "What is it?" she asked. "Aren't you glad to be back?"

"Sui… why did you do it?" Chou'un asked at length.

Bachou turned to face her. "Do what?"

"Why did you save me?"

"What kind of question is that?" Bachou frowned, taking a step closer.

"We're commanders in an army," Chou'un went on, her face darkening with emotion. "There will be another time, possibly very soon, when our decisions determine who lives and who dies. By making the effort to save me, you endangered the mission, and we both could have been lost, along with any others who might have come looking for us. By all rights, you should have left me."

Bachou felt her notorious temper rising as she looked at the other warrior, speaking to her so clinically about duty and command. "I

don't care!" she shouted. "Do you want to know why I saved you, Sei? Because you're my *friend*, and I *refuse* to live in a world where I have to choose between my friends and my duty! I did it because I had to, and because it was the right thing to do! If the situation had been reversed, wouldn't you have done the same?"

Chou'un did not answer for a long time, and Bachou felt a chill not unlike that which she had endured for those horrible days on Mount Tai. Then, with a soft smile, Chou'un nodded. "Of course I would have. That was why I made sure the situation was *not* reversed. Forgive me, Sui. It was selfish of me to force you into that choice in the name of duty."

Here, Chou'un closed the space between them and took Bachou's free hand in her own. "And know this. I'll always be grateful for what you endured for my sake. Always."

For a moment, Bachou waited for the punch line, as Chou'un was never this serious unless she was setting up a joke. But it never came, and it dawned on her slowly that Chou'un was being completely serious for perhaps the first time since they had met. Bachou released her hand, then reached around to scratch the back of her own head, trying not to blush. "Well, I'll never forget what you tried to do for me, either. Even if it was for the mission, you tried to save *my* life before I tried to save *yours* ."

The corner of Chou'un's mouth twisted upward in a tiny smirk. "It wasn't just for the mission, Sui."

"Well, um… thank you, then. And you're welcome."

"If there's anything you would ask of me, just give the word, and it's yours."

They resumed their slow walk to the village gates while Bachou pondered the implications of what Chou'un had just said. She was not one to give her word lightly, and Bachou knew that she had just

been given a great honor, even if she could not think of anything to ask.

After a few moments of silence, though, something did indeed occur to her. For a moment, she considered the wisdom of asking such a thing, but curiosity eventually won out. "Sei?"

"Hmm?"

"If I ask you a question, will you answer honestly?"

"If you wish."

"The day you and I met? What happened, exactly?"

"Refresh my memory?" Chou'un asked, but her deepening smirk indicated that she already knew what Bachou was driving at.

"When Rinrin brought me to meet you and Aisha, I ended up staying with you in the inn. There were only two beds, so you and I had to share. I had nightmares, and knocked you out of the bed without even knowing it."

"Ah, yes, so you did."

"And then in the morning, you said that in return, you, um, did something to me, but that since I was a virgin, you wouldn't tell me what it was."

"Ah, yes, so I did."

Bachou stopped walking and turned to face the other woman. "Tell me the truth, Sei. What *did* you do?"

"Oho, you really want to know, do you?" Chou'un grinned, leaning closer. "Whatever did naughty Chou'un, with her strange, women-loving ways, do to poor, innocent Bachou while she slept like a horse? Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Y-yes," Bachou stammered, feeling herself wilt under that gaze.

"In that case, I'll tell you," Chou'un whispered, leaning still closer until their noses were almost touching. "I did… absolutely… nothing."

Bachou blinked several times as Chou'un backed away. "N-nothing?"

"Nothing at all. I did not lay so much as a finger on you."

"But… but you said..! And then you… Sei, do you have *any* idea how long I've wondered about this?"

"Did you lose any sleep over it?"

"Sometimes, yes!"

"Then it would appear I got my revenge, wouldn't it?" Chou'un smiled sweetly.

For a moment, Bachou strongly considered undoing all of her previous efforts and strangling Chou'un on the spot, but then something melted inside her, and she simply began to laugh. Chou'un arched an eyebrow at her, trying to keep her composure, but soon she burst into giggles, and for a long time their combined laughter rang out over the rice fields.

" *Sei! Sui!"*

Both women turned to see a familiar figure rushing from the village gates. "Aisha!" Bachou called, grinning at the black-haired bandit hunter.

"Thank goodness you're back!" Kan'u smiled, embracing each of them in turn. "I was beginning to worry! Rinrin and Shuri and Ryuubi sent word that they had to go all the way to Namban, so they're still gone, but I was certain you would have been back by now! Is everything okay? Were you successful?"

"The whole story can wait," Chou'un smiled, holding up one hand to ward off any further questions. Her voice, Bachou noted, was suddenly back to its normal overconfident self. "I won't speak for Sui, but I need a good, long bath before I can endure a proper debriefing. In short, though, our mission was a success, and we have returned with the Persistence Herb."

"Oh, that's wonderful! The rest can wait, of course. I'm just glad to see you're both safe."

"There is one other thing, Aisha, that will *not* wait," Chou'un said gravely. "Sui, would you hold my spear for a moment?"

"What is it?" Kan'u asked as Bachou accepted the weapon.

Without another word, Chou'un took Kan'u's face in both hands and kissed the black-haired woman full on the lips. Kan'u's eyes went wide, but to Bachou's partial surprise, she did not pull away.

At long last, they broke, and Chou'un took back her weapon. "I'll be happy to discuss *that* with you at greater length as well, if you wish. After a bath, of course." She flipped the head of her spear over her shoulder, and with a last smile at Bachou, turned her back to the both of them and continued on toward the village.

Kan'u watched her go for a moment, eyes still wide as dinner plates, then turned to Bachou. "Um..? What was that for? What happened out there?"

"Something to make Sei re-examine the priorities in her life, I imagine," Bachou grinned, enjoying Kan'u's discomfort in spite of herself. "Ask her about it later; I'm sure she'll have more to say."

The End